

# NORTH DAKOTA CERAMIC ARTISTS:

## Promoting the arts in studios and communities

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A recent survey found that more than 45 professional ceramic artists in the state are making at least a portion of their income through their pottery. In studios throughout the state, these crafters work clay into beautiful and functional pieces. Across their communities the artists actively support the arts through special events and organizational involvement. The following are profiles of four North Dakota artists who promote ceramics in their studios and are making an economic impact in their communities.

**Davy Pottery • Burlington**  
701-838-0678 • [www.davypottery.com](http://www.davypottery.com)

Susan Davy grew up an artist. "My family was very artistic," says Davy. "We were always doing projects." In college, she studied nursing but changed interests when introduced to ceramics.

In 1974, Davy bought her first wheel. She purchased her grandparent's farmstead near Burlington in 1982 and built a studio where she currently works in high fire stoneware. She welcomes the public to her studio and hosts an open house every spring.

"We are having our 16th annual Mother's Day Show and Sale," says Davy of the May event, to which she invites other artists. Davy also opens her studio to tours for area service groups, students and the general public, and speaks



to community groups.

Davy sells her work in over 400 stores across the United States, including shops throughout North Dakota. She feels it is important to have her work available locally. "It gives community members an opportunity to purchase artwork and craftwork that is made locally. People seem to have a sense of pride about that."

She has melded arts and business into a fulltime profession and believes artists offer a unique career perspective. "I think I bring a different way of thinking about work and what a life profession is."

Davy enjoys her involvement with her craft. "Everything you do is so tangible," she says. "I love doing this, I love having my hands in clay every day."



**Marbakka Studios • Walcott**  
701-998-2097

"I like the idea that the work should be something that gives people joy and they find delight in using," says Bob Kurkowski. His involvement in ceramics began "accidentally" over 30 years ago. "If you come to like clay, it's hard not to keep your hands in it."

Kurkowski built his studio in 1981 next to his house and works in utilitarian and sculptural stoneware, and earthenware.

He stresses the importance of art. "I think art is vital to get out there. An artist isn't complete unless the public is involved."

Kurkowski served as an artist in residence in North Dakota for 30 years.

"That got me involved in communities around the state and was really fun," he says. "I never really got out and around the state until I started going around for these residencies."

The program allowed him to witness the impact of the arts. "I think the arts bring great enjoyment to people and, in that way, it enhances the community."

Kurkowski participates in



Portrait by Patrick Tupu

North Dakota has a rich heritage of pottery with well-known brands like the University of North Dakota, Rose Meade, Little Heart, Messer and Three Tribes. This pottery is made by Chuck Luessen.





the Fargo Visual Artists' Studio Crawl event held annually the first weekend in October. The event allows artists in Fargo and surrounding communities to open their studios to the public. Kurkowski is also involved with the Art Connection, a shop on Fargo's Broadway Avenue. The business showcases and sells works by Kurkowski and three other local artists.

He believes local artists offer a different perspective. "A lot of times we stay within our little circle and when artists come to the community, they can open it up to a wider world."

He has strong ties to North Dakota and enjoys being an artist here. "I grew up in this state. I like the people and I like the space. It's a very supportive community."

### Prairie Fire Pottery • Beach

701-872-3855 • [www.prairiefirepottery.com](http://www.prairiefirepottery.com)

Tama Smith finds inspiration in the state's western landscape. "I'm highly influenced by the land of North Dakota," she says. "I think my pieces really reflect the look of the land."

Smith grew up in North Dakota. After studying art out of state, she returned home. "It was the happiest day of my life when I got to move back to North Dakota."

She has lived in Beach since 1995, making and selling high fire stoneware reduction pottery at her studio on Main Street. She also discovered the importance of community involvement. "I have been told that when we came to town and set up our pottery business, people thought it was the start of a new future for Beach."

Smith worked to draw travelers from the nearby interstate and, in turn, helped many local businesses. "We came to town looking for opportunities," she says. "If you can get people to stop in your town, they will usually stop somewhere else."

Each year the studio holds the Christmas Tree Bonfire to raise money for community organizations. "We have this huge Christmas tree bonfire that's actually firing the pottery."

Smith creates special pieces for the event, which are then auctioned on the studio's website and raise around \$1,000 each year for community volunteer organizations. This year's 14th annual bonfire is Saturday, January 3, and is the kickoff event for Beach's 2009 Centennial Year celebration.



Smith is involved in various committees and organizations including the Beach Chamber of Commerce, the Economic Development Board, the Strategic Planning Committee and the Centennial Committee. "The community is all your friends and neighbors and fellow business people," she says. "You are all vital to each other."

Prairie Fire Pottery is open to the public through the fall and winter; October through December from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to Saturday. From January to April it is open on an arranged basis. In the summer, the studio is open seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

### Tinta Pottery • Valley City

701-845-1944

Artist Chuck Luessen focuses his art on the important role traditional potters played in communities centuries ago. "Everything is functional or started out with a function in mind," says Luessen. He uses different shapes, decorations and glazes in his pottery, leaving the final results to "serendipity."

"Ceramics can be pretty unpredictable. Sometimes things come out pretty cool and sometimes they don't."

Luessen began ceramics in college and quickly decided to make the craft more than a hobby. "As soon as I started making pottery, I started selling it," he says.

He has been in his current studio northwest of Valley City since 2001 and welcomes the public. "There is a fairly active group of artists in town," he says. "Promoting all the artists in the area promotes each of us individually. It's a lot easier to generate that publicity as a group."

He says communities benefit from the arts aesthetically and financially. Community members appreciate and benefit from the availability of the arts, and the whole community benefits from the financial draws of sales, shows and tourism. Luessen sells his work at the Prairie Frame Shop and the Barnes County Historical Museum in Valley City.

He is on the board of directors of the Bridges Arts Council, which raises money and distributes grants to arts groups in Valley City and communities throughout the Sheyenne River Valley.

As an artist, Luessen believes he contributes something different to his community. "I bring a little diversity, something a little bit out of the ordinary." He enjoys being involved in the arts on many levels. "The creative process can be a lot of fun with the right attitude."



*For more information about the North Dakota Council on the Arts and its programs supporting artists and communities across the state, call 701-328-7590 or visit [www.nd.gov/arts](http://www.nd.gov/arts).*